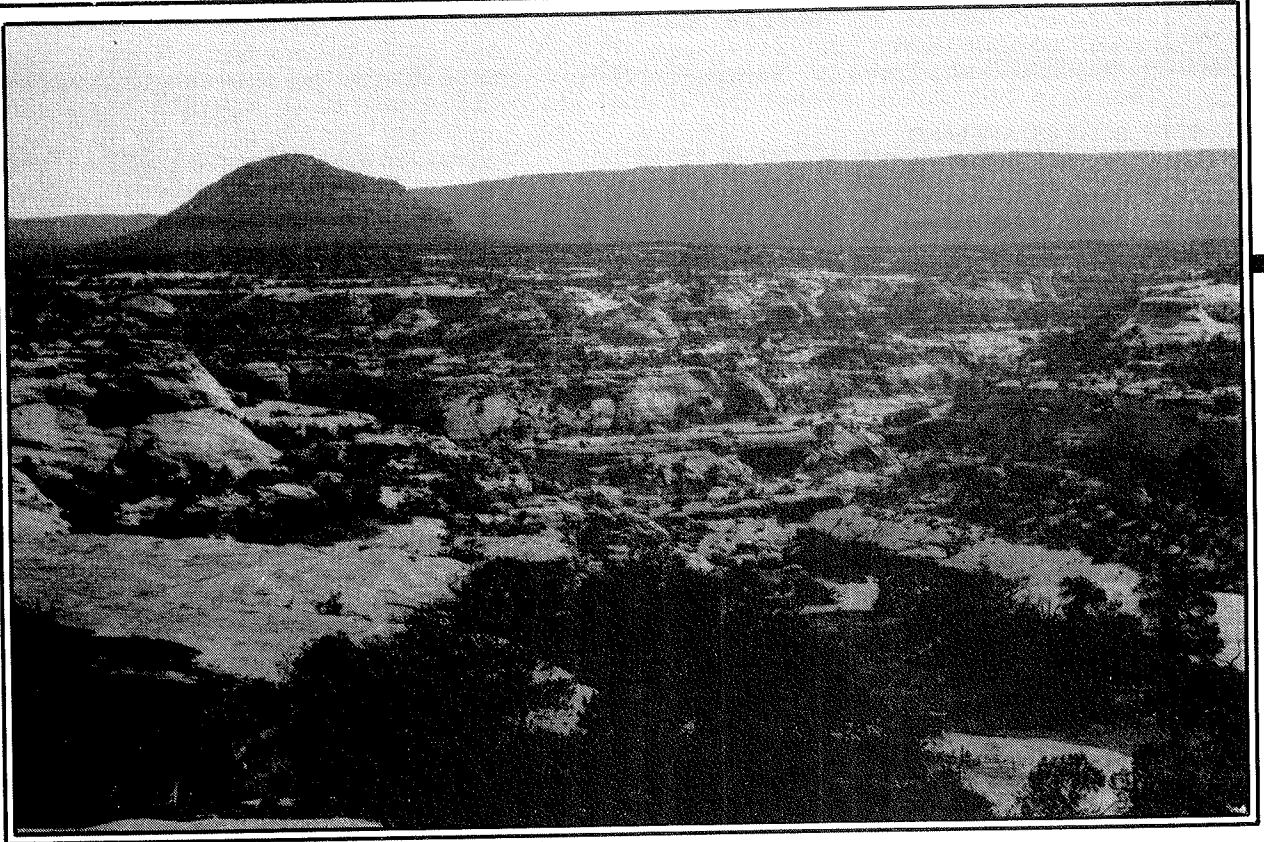


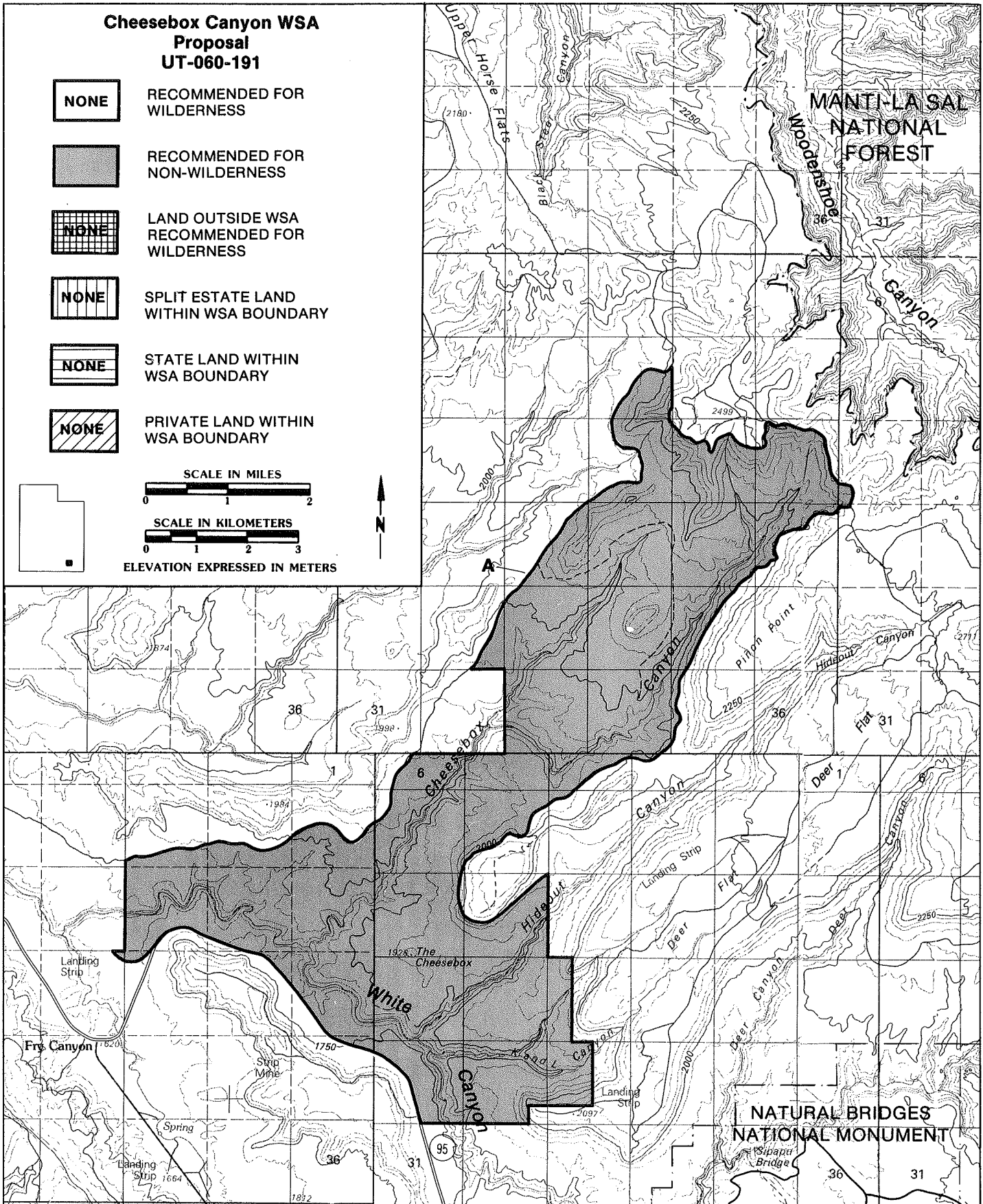
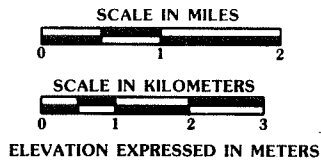
Cheesebox Canyon WSA



CHEESEBOX CANYON WSA

Cheesebox Canyon WSA Proposal UT-060-191

- NONE RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS
- RECOMMENDED FOR NON-WILDERNESS
- NONE LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS
- NONE SPLIT ESTATE LAND WITHIN WSA BOUNDARY
- NONE STATE LAND WITHIN WSA BOUNDARY
- NONE PRIVATE LAND WITHIN WSA BOUNDARY



T. 35 S.

T. 36 S.

R. 16 E.

R. 17 E.

October 1991

CHEESEBOX CANYON WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA: 15,410 acres

The Cheesebox Canyon Wilderness Study Area (WSA) (UT-060-191) is in San Juan County, about 34 miles west of Blanding, Utah (population 3,118). The study area is an irregular unit shaped like an inverted "T" oriented with the stem pointing northeast, defined by roads, terrain, and State sections (see Map). The WSA contains 5,990 acres of public land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). There are no non-Federal lands inheld in the WSA (see Table 1).

The WSA is in the Canyonlands Section of the Colorado Plateau Physiographic Province. The study area is a small mesa capped by The Cheesebox and cut by four meandering, steep-walled canyons which drain southwesterly into White Canyon.

A portion of White Canyon crosses the southwestern portion of the WSA.

The surface of the mesa slopes gently southwest, and is almost featureless except for a few low buttes. Elevations in the study area range from 6,200 feet in the southwest to 8,200 feet in the northwest.

About half of the area is barren of vegetation. Most of the remainder of the WSA is pinyon-juniper woodland and scattered stands of Ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir on north-facing slopes at the higher elevations with scattered areas of desert shrub and grasses.

The climate is semiarid, with cool winters and warm summers.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and was included in the Utah BLM Statewide Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) finalized in November 1990.

**TABLE 1
LAND STATUS AND ACREAGE SUMMARY IN THE STUDY AREA**

WITHIN THE WSA	ACRES
BLM (surface and subsurface)	15,410
Split-Estate (BLM surface only)	0
In-holdings (State, Private)	0
Total	15,410
WITHIN THE RECOMMENDED WILDERNESS BOUNDARY	
BLM (within the WSA)	0
BLM (outside the WSA)	0
Split-Estate (within the WSA)	0
Split-Estate (outside the WSA)	0
Total BLM land recommended for wilderness	0
In-holdings (State, private)	0
WITHIN THE AREA NOT RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS	
BLM	15,410
Split-Estate	0
Total BLM land not recommended for wilderness	15,410
In-holdings (State, Private)	0

Source: BLM File Data

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Two alternatives were analyzed in the EIS: a no wilderness (no action) alternative, which is the recommendation in this report, and an all wilderness alternative.

Subsequent to publication of the Utah BLM Statewide Wilderness Final EIS, the Utah State Director approved the San Juan Resource Area Resource Management Plan (RMP). The plan includes the southern half (approximately 7,800 acres) of the Cheesebox Canyon WSA in a Scenic Highway Corridor Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) to maintain scenic quality as viewed from highways U-95, U-261, and U-276. Special management requirements now in effect within the ACEC, where consistent with valid existing rights, include: stipulations to prevent surface occupancy on oil and gas leases (Category 3); requirement for an approved plan of operations with special conditions to limit surface use for mining related activity; disposal of mineral materials subject to visual quality considerations; private and commercial use of woodland products in designated areas only, except on-site collection of dead wood for campfires would be allowed; limitation of off-highway vehicle (OHV) use to existing roads and trails; management to limit recreation use if scenic values are being damaged; management to meet Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class I objectives.

Special management requirements in the northern half of the WSA, which is not included in the ACEC, where consistent with valid existing rights, include: mineral leasing, geophysical work and disposal of mineral materials with special conditions to protect scenic resources, management to meet VRM Class II objectives and limitation of OHV use to existing roads and trails.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE:

- 0 acres
(recommended for wilderness)
- (15,410 acres
(not recommended for wilderness))

The recommendation for this WSA is to release the entire area for uses other than as wilderness. Designation of the entire area as wilderness is considered to be the environmentally preferable alternative as it would result in the

least change from the natural environment over the long term. The alternative selected, however, would be implemented in a manner which would utilize all practical means to avoid or minimize adverse environmental impacts.

Although all of the WSA is in a natural condition and 60 percent has outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation, wilderness management problems exist because of outside sights and sounds. Traffic on State Highway 95, adjacent to the southern boundary, adversely affects solitude on the mesa in the southwestern third of the WSA.

Approximately 7,800 acres of the WSA are in a Scenic Highway Corridor ACEC where restrictions on OHV use, mineral and energy exploration, visual impacts, and woodland harvest would continue to be administratively applied if the area is released from wilderness consideration and protection of wilderness characteristics is not a management objective.

No mineral exploration and development is expected in the area, but mineral development is predicted on the mesa which is adjacent to and higher than the WSA. Sights and sounds resulting from such development would further reduce outstanding opportunities for solitude in the WSA.

3. CRITERIA CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING THE WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATION

Wilderness Characteristics

A. Naturalness

Naturalness is defined as an attribute in which the evidence of man is substantially unnoticeable to the average visitor and where minor imprints of man exhibit no cumulative impact that is substantially noticeable. Overall, all 15,410 acres of land within the borders of Cheesebox WSA appear natural.

The large expanses of exposed slickrock and steep-sided canyons and buttes within the WSA characterize its naturalness.

Since establishment of the WSA, approximately 1 acre has been disturbed. This disturbance is the result of seismic geophysical exploration conducted in

CHEESEBOX CANYON WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1982. This work consisted of drilling shallow exploratory holes every 220 feet along an existing way. A portable drill was used and no new access was required. Minimal site preparation was required. This disturbance has been reclaimed to a substantially unnoticeable condition.

The major imprint inside the WSA boundary is a way that intrudes into the unit from the western boundary road for 4.1 miles. It winds around the head of the west fork of Cheesebox Canyon along the plateau and ends at the rim of the east fork of Cheesebox Canyon. It was originally constructed with mechanical equipment, but is now maintained solely by the passage of vehicles.

Just below the rim of Home Mesa, cuts have been made by a bulldozer probably in search of uranium deposits. These cuts total about 2 miles, exposing soil on the steep hillside. These cuts lead nowhere in particular and are not traveled regularly.

Forming the unit's eastern boundary, a road cuts through the forested slope of Pinyon Point. This road is the unit's boundary for 6.7 miles to Lone Butte. At Lone Butte the road switchbacks 600 feet up to the butte top. A fork of this road cuts across the eastern cliff face of Lone Butte, ending at a mine just around the tip of the butte. This mining activity is evident from a distance because of gray tailings that have spilled down the side of the red butte.

A short way leaves State Highway 95 on the unit's extreme southwest, weaves among the sparse pinyon-juniper trees, and loops back on itself at the edge of a State section.

A few range-associated imprints are concentrated in a canyon just east of Nook Canyon. On the western rim of the canyon there is an old brush-fence corral about 30 yards in diameter. A stock trail has been constructed leading from this corral into the small canyon. The trail is perhaps 75 yards long with rock-blasting evident in a few places. Where this trail meets the canyon bottom, a four-strand barbed wire fence spans the canyon bottom. Just up the canyon from this fence, the wash bottom forks and two pour-offs prevent further travel. A

developed spring is located in this portion.

At the western foot of Ram Mesa, a seismic line crosses the boundary road into the unit. This line is well screened by the pinyon and juniper trees on the ground but shows up clearly from the air or high points of the WSA.

A stock trail climbs a ridge on the unit's northeast side up to Home Mesa. This trail is referred to as the Gravel Trail. Wheeled travel on this trail is not possible. The trail makes use of a slickrock wash where it leaves the boundary road. This trail is not a substantial impact upon wilderness values; it is an eroding trail 3 to 5 feet wide.

The horse trails in Hideout and Cheesebox Canyons are overgrown from lack of use.

B. Solitude

About 24 miles of deep, narrow, and tightly meandering canyons provide outstanding opportunities for solitude.

Cheesebox Canyon cuts into relatively flat pinyon-juniper covered terrain that is enclosed by highlands rising 550 to 1,000 feet above this intermediate plateau. The eastern and western boundary roads run along the bases of these higher mesas and comprise substantially noticeable cuts through the forested mesa land and intrude upon a visitor's feeling of isolation. The uranium mines and exploration cuts on the mesa cliff slopes of Home Mesa, Pinyon Point, Lone Butte, Fry Mesa (across State Highway 95), and Found Mesa also comprise highly visible imprints of human activity outside, yet near, the unit.

Major commercial airline traffic over the WSA, although not always heard, is fairly constant daily. Its impact on wilderness solitude is negligible, although contrails sometimes streak the sky.

The cuts and fills of State Highway 95 can be seen from as far as the northern end of the unit. Although traffic is not heavy on this highway, sights and sounds of highway traffic are an influence into the WSA for a substantial distance.

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Headlights at night are especially noticeable in the unit. Due to the above factors, a substantial portion of the WSA (6,100 acres) does not offer outstanding opportunities for solitude. Within the canyons of this unit, however, these outside influences are largely blocked. Even part of White Canyon, less than 1 mile from the highway, is sufficiently deep and narrow to block outside sights and sounds.

Overall, in over 60 percent of the WSA (9,310 acres) the opportunities for solitude meet the outstanding criteria.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

The outstanding opportunities within the canyons and northern portion of the WSA (9,310 acres) allow this WSA to meet the outstanding primitive and unconfined recreation criteria.

The canyons and buttes rising above the plateau offer varied challenges to the primitive recreationist. Traversing the canyons is sometimes very challenging due to pour-offs or pools of water, and getting out the sides is often very difficult. Hiking and camping opportunities include backpacking, dayhiking, rock scrambling, swimming in the plunge pools, hunting, and exploring and discovering side canyons, seeps, pools, sculptured sandstone formations, and ancient Indian ruins. Nature study and sightseeing pursuits are also available.

The WSA has an irregular boundary, which is less than 1 mile wide in places. Additionally, in the southern half of the WSA, only the area within the canyons offers outstanding solitude, further confining the area's primitive recreation opportunities. Approximately 6,100 acres do not meet the outstanding recreation criteria.

D. Special Features

Twelve recorded archaeological sites are within the unit. Late 19th and early 20th century cowboys roamed the canyons of southeast Utah herding cattle.

Hite was a popular Colorado River crossing in those days and the rim of White Canyon was used as a route to points further east.

Outlaws also used these canyons, disappearing in Hideout Canyon occasionally.

Peregrine falcon and bald eagle, listed as endangered species, may make occasional use of the WSA. Seven other animal species and four plant species that are considered sensitive may occur in the WSA.

Refer to Appendix 4 and the Affected Environment, Vegetation and Wildlife Including Special Status Species sections of the Utah BLM Statewide Wilderness Final EIS for additional information.

The WSA is within the White Canyon-Red Canyon Desert Bighorn Sheep Habitat Management Area. Desert bighorn sheep utilize the upper ends of Cheesebox Canyon, as well as Found Mesa and Fry Point. Each year a limited number of desert bighorn sheep permits are issued to hunters on a once-in-a-lifetime basis. The sheep are a prized big game trophy.

Natural Bridges National Monument is less than 2 miles to the east and includes part of White Canyon. Hikers from the monument sometimes extend their trips into the WSA portion of White Canyon.

The entire WSA is rated Class A for scenic quality. The canyon is sculptured rock with swirling patterns, carved pools, and sheer rock walls.

Views from the WSA include the cliffs of the highlands to the east, the Wingate Buttes, Navajo Mountain, the Henry Mountains, and the valley of White Canyon, all features outside of the unit.

The WSA contains special geologic features such as arches and natural bridges.

Although there is no perennial stream present, White Canyon was identified in the Nationwide Rivers Inventory as a possible addition to the National Wild and Scenic River System. The inventory found White Canyon to be an excellent example of intermittent streams in this region.

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Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS)

A. Expanding the Diversity of Natural Systems and Features as Represented by Ecosystems

Wilderness designation of this WSA would add a combination of potential natural vegetation (PNV) ecosystems not presently represented in the NWPS.

PNV is the vegetative type that would eventually become climax vegetation if not altered by human interference, and is not necessarily the vegetation that is currently present in an area.

The WSA is in the Colorado Plateau Province/Ecoregion. The PNV in the WSA is blackbrush (9,250 acres) and saltbush-greasewood (6,160 acres). This combination of PNV types in the WSA are not now represented in the NWPS nationally or in Utah, although they are represented in other BLM study areas in and outside of Utah, and the saltbush-greasewood PNV is represented in the NWPS outside of Utah. This information is summarized in Table 2 from data compiled in December 1989.

B. Assessing the Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive Recreation within a Days Driving Time (5 Hours) of Major Population Centers

The WSA is not within a 5-hour drive of any major population centers.

C. Balancing the Geographic Distribution of Wilderness Areas

The Cheesebox Canyon WSA would not contribute significantly to balancing the geographic distribution of wilderness areas within the NWPS. As of January, 1987, the NWPS included 93 areas comprising 5,475,207 acres in Utah and in Arizona and Colorado, the adjacent states nearest the WSA.

A Cheesebox Canyon Wilderness would supplement the NWPS in the Canyonlands Section of the Colorado Plateau, however, where there are just two established wilderness areas, totaling 70,751 acres.

There are four designated wilderness areas within 100 miles of the WSA. To the north is the 45,000-acre Dark Canyon Wilderness (U.S. Forest Service [FS]), to the east is the 8,100-acre Mesa Verde Wilderness (National Park Service [NPS]), to the southwest is the 112,400-acre Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness (BLM) and to the northwest is the 25,751-acre Box-Death Hollow Wilderness (FS).

Manageability (The area must be capable of being effectively managed to preserve its wilderness character.)

The area could be managed as wilderness; however, activities outside of the WSA will continue to degrade wilderness values within the WSA.

TABLE 2
ECOSYSTEM REPRESENTATION

BAILEY-KUCHLER CLASSIFICATION (PNV)	NWPS AREAS		OTHER BLM STUDIES	
	AREAS	ACRES	AREAS	ACRES
NATIONWIDE (COLORADO PLATEAU PROVINCE)				
Blackbrush	0	0	11	220,814
Saltbush-Greasewood	3	45,553	37	1,025,447
UTAH (COLORADO PLATEAU PROVINCE)				
Blackbrush	0	0	11	220,814
Saltbush-Greasewood	0	0	8	140,685

Source: BLM File Data.

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Opportunities for solitude are adversely impacted in 40 percent of the WSA by the sights and sounds of roads and traffic on State Highway 95. Opportunities for solitude may be further degraded by potential mineral exploration and development on lands (State and Federal) adjoining the WSA.

There are 98 existing mining claims in the WSA but the potential for valid discoveries and eventual production are low. No oil and gas leases exist, and the potential for oil and gas resources is low in the WSA. Based on these conditions, no surface disturbance is anticipated in the WSA if it is designated wilderness. Off-highway vehicle (OHV) use can be controlled because the rugged topography and limited access restrict vehicle use. Domestic livestock grazing would continue as authorized but would not significantly detract from wilderness values. There are no inholdings or other valid rights that would complicate wilderness management.

Energy and Mineral Resource Values

Because the WSA is not recommended for wilderness designation, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and U.S. Bureau of Mines (USBM) did not prepare a mineral assessment report for this WSA. According to BLM geologists and a summary by the USGS and the USBM, the WSA has low potential for oil and gas and for uranium and other metallic minerals. There are no known deposits of leasable or locatable minerals in the WSA. A few exploratory oil wells have been drilled in the vicinity of the WSA, and all were abandoned. The WSA is within the White Canyon uranium mining district. The uranium deposits are concentrated in the Shinarump Member of the Chinle Formation. Although the WSA is surrounded by favorable strata of the Chinle Formation, most of the Chinle, except in one small knoll (totaling about 10 acres) has been eroded.

Impacts on Resources

The comparative impact table (Table 3) summarizes the effects on pertinent resources for alternatives considered including designation or nondesignation of the area as wilderness.

Local Social and Economic Considerations

Social and economic factors were not considered to be significant issues in the EIS.

Summary of WSA-Specific Comments

Public involvement has occurred throughout the wilderness review process. Comments received during the early stages of the EIS preparation were used to develop significant study issues and alternatives for the ultimate management of the WSA.

During formal public review of the Draft EIS, a total of 158 inputs specifically addressing this WSA were received from 1,347 commenters, including oral statements received at 17 public hearings on the EIS. Each letter or oral testimony was considered to be one input. Duplicate letters or oral statements by the same commenter were not counted as additional inputs or signatures. Each individual was credited with one signature or testimony regardless of the number of inputs. In general, 364 commenters supported wilderness designation for part or all of the WSA, while 976 commenters were opposed. Seven commenters addressed the relative merits of the EIS but took no formal position on wilderness designation.

Those favoring wilderness commented on the need to preserve the area for future generations, add the diversity of the WSA to the NWPS, and to protect wilderness values in the study area from development. The majority of those commenting were from other states.

Those opposing wilderness were concerned that wilderness would restrict public access and harm local and State economies. They also felt that there is no need for more wilderness and that the study area will stay as it is now without designation and that other kinds of management are sufficient. Most of those opposing wilderness designation were from rural Utah.

Two Federal agencies, the NPS and USBM, commented on the WSA in the Draft EIS. USBM did not take a position regarding designation of Cheesebox Canyon WSA but

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commented that BLM underrated the petroleum potential of the WSA.

The NPS favored the all wilderness alternative and recommended that State sections adjacent to the WSA be considered in the Final EIS as potential additions to the area when nonconforming uses on these lands cease. The NPS favored designation as a means to protect desert bighorn sheep which occur in part of the WSA. Additionally, the NPS stated that a wilderness designation for Cheesebox Canyon WSA would complement the possible reintroduction of bighorn sheep at Natural Bridges National Monument by providing relatively undisturbed habitat for the sheep.

No comment letters were received on the Final EIS.

There are no State sections in the WSA. There are five State sections adjacent to the WSA boundary. In commenting on the Draft EIS, the State of Utah expressed general opposition to wilderness designation but did not take a definite position regarding wilderness designation of the WSA. The State commented that the WSA has moderate wilderness values and moderate to low conflicts. The State commented that an administrative designation to facilitate special management of cultural values is preferable to wilderness designation.

The Cheesebox Canyon WSA is in San Juan County. The San Juan County Master Plan emphasizes multiple use of public lands and zones the WSA as open range and forest land. The San Juan County Commission is opposed to wilderness designation for the Cheesebox Canyon WSA and has endorsed the Consolidated Local Government Response to Wilderness that opposes wilderness designation of BLM lands in Utah. In commenting on the Draft EIS the Commission noted that designation of the WSA as wilderness would be in conflict with the County Master Plan. The Commission noted that underlying natural resources are not insignificant and access should not be precluded. The WSA is surrounded by visible roads and two additional roads penetrate the area. The Commission also pointed out that State holdings along the boundary of the WSA would conflict with wilderness management and that the

WSA is geologically and ecologically identical to other areas already protected in the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, National Parks, National Monuments and FS wilderness within the Colorado Plateau and in San Juan County.

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Table 3
Comparative Summary of Impacts by Alternative^a

Alternatives	
Issue Topic	Recommendation No Action/No Wilderness
Impacts on Wilderness Values	<p>Wilderness values would not be protected by wilderness designation. In the foreseeable future, naturalness and opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation would be directly lost on 2 acres and indirectly reduced in quality on about 154 acres due to development of rangeland projects. Special features would not be significantly affected. Vehicular use of ways would continue to occasionally detract from opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation in the WSA.</p> <p>Wilderness designation would preserve wilderness values, in the WSA. In the foreseeable future, disturbance from rangeland development would result in a direct reduction in the quality of naturalness and opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation on 1 acre, and an indirect temporary reduction in the quality of wilderness values on up to 25 acres. Because wilderness management criteria would be met, wilderness values would not be lost.</p>
Impacts on Recreation	<p>The quality of primitive recreation would be slightly reduced by construction of rangeland projects and continued (light) vehicular use of 5 miles of ways. Vehicle-based recreational opportunities would not be affected. The wild and scenic river values of White Canyon would be protected by existing regulations and because it is in a Scenic Highway Corridor ACEC. Both primitive and motorized recreational use would increase.</p> <p>Primitive recreational values and wild and scenic river values would be protected. Vehicular recreation opportunities would be precluded on 5 miles of ways. Loss of the opportunity for vehicle use would not be significant because the WSA is not a destination area for such activities. Primitive recreational use would increase.</p>

^a The BLM San Juan RMP was approved following publication of the BLM Utah Statewide Wilderness EIS. The analysis of impacts summarized here has been modified to reflect the more restrictive management practices established by the RMP.